

BEYOND WOMEN'S ISSUES: FEMINISM AND SOCIAL WORK

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The re-emergence of the feminist movement in the United States during the last 25 years has had major influences on this society. Extensive individual and social changes resulting from changing views about the roles of women and of men are evidence of feminist influence on private lives and public structures. Feminist theory has impacted not only individual and collective lives but ways in which knowledge about individuals and society is developed and used. Feminism is transforming both social thought and social action.

Social work educators are also being influenced by and influencing feminist thought and action. Recent literature calls for a re-examination of social work learning and practice based upon new knowledge about women as well as new interpretations of previously existing theories and beliefs about women's roles in society (see, for example, Abramowitz, Hopkins, Olds & Waring, 1982; Berkun, 1984; Brandwein & Wheelock, 1978; Hopkins, 1980; Kravetz, 1982; Lowenstein, 1976; Meisel & Freidman, 1974; Price, Foster, Curtis & Behling, 1979; Rathbone-McCuan, 1984; Rosenman & Ruckdeschel, 1981; Rubenstein, 1981; Schwartz, 1973). This re-examination was most typically advocated within the context of incorporating content on women's issues into the curriculum. More recently, there is evidence of a shift from this "women's issues" approach to the integration of feminist content into the curriculum. Feminism is now being proposed by some social work educators and practitioners as an appropriate theoretical framework for the study of women's experiences in society and for the development of intervention strategies to positively alter those experiences (see, for example, Bricker-Jenkins & Hooyman, 1984; Van Den Bergh & Cooper, 1984).

This research is an investigation of the nature and extent of the interaction of feminism with social work education. The following research questions are addressed:

- (1) To what degree do social work educators identify themselves as feminists?

- (2) With what type of feminism do social work educators identify?
- (3) How do social work educators' views of problems affecting women vary depending upon degree and type of feminist identification?

Conceptual Framework

Feminist Theory

This research builds upon feminism as a theoretical framework for viewing the world. As such, feminist theory provides a lens for the study of women's experiences in society. Feminism is defined, for the purposes of this research, as a mode of analysis involving certain ways of thinking and of acting which are designed to eliminate the oppression of women in society in order to achieve women's liberation (Andersen, 1983; Hartsock, 1981; Jaggar, 1983). Feminist theory forms the basis for the study of the experiences of women in society, specifically of women's status and position within that society, on the premise that women's experiences emerge from its social, political and economic structures. Feminist thought assumes that women's interests and perspectives are valid in and of themselves, are not inferior or secondary to those of men's, nor should they be defined only in relation to or as a deviation from men's experiences. The absence of these assumptions in traditional sociological, psychological, historical and philosophical scholarship is one of the criticisms which has emerged in feminist scholarship.

In addition to the premise that social and institutional factors form the basis for woman's position in society, feminism purports that existing data provide consistent evidence regarding the treatment of women as inferior citizens (Andersen, 1983). Feminism as a mode of analysis is grounded in the connectedness between the social institutions which shape the daily lives of individuals and in an orientation to social change (Hartsock, 1981). Feminist theory is

simultaneously political and scientific. ... Feminist scholars are distinguished from non-feminist scholars precisely by their common political interest in ending women's oppression, and they see their scholarly work as contributing to a comprehensive understanding of how women's liberation should be achieved. (Jaggar, 1983, p. 354)

While feminism is grounded in these fundamental premises, there is no single or universally accepted version of feminism. A major theme which emerges from an analysis of feminist theory is definitional diversity. Feminism as a definitional concept includes the components of a description of present reality, explanations regarding its roots, analyses of positive and negative elements of current reality, and proposals and strategies to effect social change in pursuit of stated values and goals. In analyzing the status of women in society, differing insights are developed depending on the particular feminist framework employed. Each framework yields a different interpretation of the social world and influences the assumptions, observations, and conclusions that are made regarding women's experiences in society (Andersen, 1983) as well as the change strategies that are employed to alter that status and those experiences.

Major Feminist Theoretical Perspectives

Three major feminist frameworks, or theoretical perspectives, which are identifiable in feminist thought, include liberal feminism, socialist feminism, and radical feminism.

Liberal feminism locates the origins of women's oppression in women's lack of equal civil rights and equal opportunities as well as in past tradition and learned psychology associated with the sex role socialization process. Based upon this analysis, liberal feminism purports that women's liberation will be achieved with the removal of sexist discrimination so that women have the opportunity to pursue their potential for individual development just as fully as men do. This feminist perspective emphasizes social and legal reform through policies designed to create equal opportunities for women and to establish individual civil rights so that no one is denied access to the existing social-economic system because of sex, race, or class. Liberal feminism further assumes that the re-education of the public concerning the sex role socialization process is a means towards achieving more liberated and egalitarian gender relations (Andersen, 1983; Carroll, 1984; Fulenwider, 1980; Jaggar, 1983; Jaggar & Rothenberg, 1984).

Socialist feminism locates the origins of women's oppression in the interaction of the capitalist system based on class inequities, with the patriarchal system based on gender inequities. As a result of this interaction, women are subordinated and exploited through misuse of their labor in the marketplace, for which they are persistently underpaid, and of

their labor in the home, for which they are not paid at all. Current reality is viewed in terms of an economically based class system reinforced by sexist attitudes and practices. According to this analysis, feminism aims to abolish both capitalism and male dominance in order to end women's oppression. In contrast to the reform-oriented liberal feminist perspective, socialist feminism emphasizes the necessity for revolutionary societal changes in order to eliminate the existing unequal distribution of power. Equality is viewed not only in terms of opportunity but, more crucially, in terms of rewards. This perspective necessitates and facilitates an understanding of the experiences of women of all classes and races as a means of understanding oppression. An essential feminist strategy for achieving the liberation of women involves alignment with other oppressed groups in order to find their common grounds of oppression and to resist women's subordination in the marketplace and in the home (Andersen, 1983; Fulenwider, 1980; Jaggar, 1983).

Radical feminism locates the origins of women's oppression in the patriarchal control of female sexuality and female fertility. This perspective identifies male power and privilege in patriarchal relations as the essential determinant of women's subordination. Radical feminism emphasizes that in the existing social order women are oppressed and exploited primarily in sexual and procreative relations in the home, which is the sphere of life defined by the male culture as personal rather than as political. Just as with socialist feminism, radical feminism challenges society's basic structure and identifies the need for revolutionizing its existing organization. An essential strategy for eliminating women's oppression is the establishment of a womanculture separate from the lives of men, thus redefining social relations and overthrowing or undermining the present dominant patriarchy (Andersen, 1983; Jaggar, 1983).

In summary, this conceptual framework provides an explication of feminism as a theoretical framework for the study of women's experiences in society, i.e. as a way of viewing the world. There is, however, no single definition of feminism since as a theory and as a movement it is characterized by diversity and complexity. Therefore, a working definition of feminism for purposes of this research has been presented and three major feminist frameworks have been described. This conceptual framework undergirds the present research which is designed to investigate the influences of feminist identification upon social work educators' views of women's issues.

Research Design

Hypotheses

Two propositions emerge from this framework as guides for this research. First, feminists view the world differently than non-feminists. Second, a feminist's view of the world is shaped by the particular feminist theoretical perspective employed.

These propositions were applied to a random sample of faculty (N=733) in all accredited graduate schools of social work through the dissemination of a Women's Issues Survey. Two hypotheses were tested. It was predicted, first, that feminist educators would rate problems affecting women as more severe than non-feminist educators; and, second, that differences in problem severity ratings between liberal, socialist, and radical feminists would be evident.

Independent Variable

Feminist identification constituted the independent variable and was measured in terms of type and degree, as follows. Three definitions of feminism, representing the liberal, socialist, and radical perspectives, were presented to social work educators. Each educator was asked to choose the definition which she or he most preferred. Respondents were then asked, based upon this definition, "To what degree do you consider yourself to be a feminist?". Responses were recorded using a 7-point Likert-type scale from "I do not at all consider myself to be a feminist" to "I absolutely consider myself to be a feminist." This approach to the independent variable yielded three categories for analyses pertaining to degree of feminist identification: non-feminist (1-3); neutral (4); and feminist (5-7). Feminist subcategories included weak feminist identification (5); moderate feminist identification (6); and strong feminist identification (7). Types of feminism, i.e. definitional perspectives, were combined with feminist identification scores 5-7 resulting in the categories of liberal feminist, socialist feminist, and radical feminist.

Dependent Variables

Social work educators' views of women's issues constituted the dependent variables. "Women's issues" were defined as "problems that place a heavy burden on women because of the structural features of society or because of the traditional definitions of the social roles and responsibilities of women vis-a-vis men" (Williams & Green, 1985, p. 2). Respondents' views of these issues were measured in terms of their perceived severity of 79 problems affecting women. Respondents were asked to rate each problem on a 7-point Likert-type scale ranging from "extremely serious" to "not at all serious."

Data Collection

Data were collected by mail from March-May, 1985. An initial mailing and two follow-up mailings resulted in a 60 percent (N=427) response rate. Respondents were guaranteed anonymity through the particular data collection procedure employed.

Research Findings

Degree of Feminist Identification

The mean score on degree of feminist identification was 5.53, indicating a weak to moderate identification with feminism. Results by category were as follows: non-feminist: 9.3%; neutral: 9%; weak feminist identification: 21.6%; moderate feminist identification: 27.6%; strong feminist identification: 32.5%.

Type of Feminist Identification.

The majority of respondents, 78.8%, most preferred the liberal feminist perspective as a definition of feminism. The perspective of socialist feminism was most preferred by 16.8% and 6.3% most preferred the radical feminist perspective.

An open-ended item was included to allow respondents to present a preferred definition of feminism in lieu of the three perspectives specified, if they so desired. Seven percent responded to this item. Two categories emerged from these alternative definitions: (1) preference for a broadened definition to include other oppressed groups, e.g. men, poor, working class,

people of color, elderly; and (2) preference for a definition which would combine elements of the liberal, socialist, and/or radical perspectives.

Degree and Type of Feminist Identification.

Categories of the degree of feminist identification and type of feminist identification variables were cross-tabulated to yield joint frequency distributions. Of the non-feminists, 82.8% most preferred the liberal feminist perspective as a definition of feminism; 3.4% preferred the socialist feminist perspective and 13.8% preferred the radical feminist perspective. Among feminists, 77% most preferred the liberal feminist perspective; 18% most preferred the socialist feminist perspective; and 4% most preferred the radical feminist perspective. Cell size was insufficient to test for significance using chi square.

Hypothesis 1

The first hypothesis predicted that feminist social work educators view problems affecting women as more severe than non-feminist social work educators. Feminists viewed 71 of the 79 problems affecting women as more serious than did non-feminists. Through the use of t-tests, significant differences between groups were identified for 25 problems. Feminists viewed only one of these, i.e. "inadequate spiritual and religious training," as less severe than non-feminists. With this one exception, when there were significant differences between feminists' and non-feminists' severity ratings, feminists viewed problems affecting women as more severe than did non-feminists, thus confirming hypothesis 1 (see Table 1).

Hypothesis 2

The second hypothesis predicted that type of feminist identification influences feminist social work educators' views regarding the severity of problems affecting women. Mean differences on problem severity ratings between liberal feminists, socialist feminists, and radical feminists were tested through a one-way analysis of variance. Significant differences between groups were found for 24 of the 79 problems.

The Student-Newman-Keuls post-hoc test was used to determine which issues differentiated liberal, socialist, and radical feminists (see Table 2). Socialist feminists rated 19 of the 24 issues as more severe than

Table 1

PROBLEMS AFFECTING WOMEN VIEWED AS MORE SEVERE¹ BY
FEMINIST THAN NON-FEMINIST SOCIAL WORK EDUCATORS

Inflexible Work Schedules Set by Employers
 Unwanted Pregnancy
 Spouse Abuse
 Lack of Equal Educational Opportunities
 Conflicts Between Work and Family Life
 Violence Against Women in the Media
 Interpersonal Conflicts with Men in the Work Environment
 Lack of Role Models for Women
 Not Enough Women Elected to Political Office
 Pay Inequities for Work of Comparable Value (Worth)
 Not Enough Women Being Promoted to Higher Management Jobs
 Lack of Support Networks
 Poor Self Esteem
 Problems Related to Health and Health Care
 Not Enough Job Training
 Lack of Information about Legal Rights
 Prejudice Against Women in General
 Lack of Unions Supportive of Women
 Low Wages
 Inadequate Legal Representation
 Poverty
 Domineering Attitudes of Men
 Lack of Passage of the Equal Rights Amendment
 Inability to Break into "Old Boy Networks"

¹p ≤ .05

Table 2

DIFFERENCES¹ IN PROBLEM SEVERITY RATINGS BY TYPE OF FEMINIST IDENTIFICATION

PROBLEMS VIEWED AS MORE SEVERE BY SOCIALIST FEMINISTS THAN BY LIBERAL FEMINISTS

Inadequate Housing
 Ethnic Minority Discrimination
 Inadequate Income or Support
 Lack of Equal Job Opportunities
 Nonpayment of Child Support
 Poor Job Market
 Lack of Equal Educational Opportunities
 Violence Against Women in the Media
 Unemployment
 Pay Inequities for Work of Comparable Value (Worth)
 Hunger and Malnutrition
 Insurance Inequities
 Prejudice Against Women in General
 Low Wages
 Inadequate Legal Representation
 Lack of Access to Non-Traditional Jobs
 Domineering Attitudes of Men
 Underemployment
 Lack of Passage of the Equal Rights Amendment

PROBLEMS VIEWED AS MORE SEVERE BY SOCIALIST FEMINISTS THAN BY RADICAL FEMINISTS

Poor Job Market
 Unemployment

PROBLEMS VIEWED AS MORE SEVERE BY RADICAL FEMINISTS THAN BY SOCIALIST FEMINISTS

Sexual Harassment
 Displaced Homemakers

PROBLEMS VIEWED AS MORE SEVERE BY RADICAL FEMINISTS THAN BY LIBERAL FEMINISTS

Interpersonal Conflicts with Men in the Work Environment
 Sexual Harassment
 Pay Inequities for Work of Comparable Value (Worth)
 Displaced Homemakers
 Prejudice Against Women in General
 Inability to Obtain Credit

PROBLEMS VIEWED AS MORE SEVERE BY LIBERAL FEMINISTS THAN BY SOCIALIST FEMINISTS

Inadequate Spiritual and Religious Training

¹p < .05

liberal feminists and 2 issues as more severe than radical feminists. Radical feminists rated 2 of the issues as more severe than socialist feminists and 6 as more severe than liberal feminists. Liberal feminists rated 1 problem as more severe than socialist feminists and no problem as more severe than radical feminists.

In view of these findings, hypothesis 2 is supported in that differences exist in problem severity ratings between liberal, socialist and radical feminists.

Discussion

This research has been guided by the propositions emerging from its conceptual framework that, first, feminists view the world differently than non-feminists; and, second, that a feminist's view of the world is shaped by the particular feminist theoretical perspective employed. The research findings support these propositions when applied to social work educators. The differences noted in social work educators' views of women's issues suggest that feminist theory does provide a way of viewing the world and a lens through which women's position in society can be analyzed. In this regard, the import of this research is the successful testing of the theoretical construct of feminism, specifically among social work educators. A discussion of these findings follows.

Degree of Feminist Identification

An examination of the issues which differentiate feminists from non-feminists indicates a definite orientation toward the macrosystem level of analysis. This suggests that while feminist and non-feminist social work educators view problems in the microsystem similarly, feminist educators perceive problems in the macrosystem as more severely impacting women than do non-feminist educators. These findings are consistent with and can be explained by the theoretical foundations of feminism. Feminist theory, as previously explicated, stems from the premise that women's experiences emerge from society's social, political, and economic structures, i.e. the macrosystem. Feminism as a mode of analysis provides the basis for the study of the status and position of women within those institutional structures of society.

Type of Feminist Identification

The liberal feminist perspective is overwhelmingly the preferred definition of feminism among the research respondents, regardless of degree of feminist identification. This is understandable in that the social work profession has developed in the liberal reformist tradition just as liberal feminism is an outgrowth of that tradition. Furthermore, liberal feminism is the most mainstream feminist perspective as well as the least controversial.

The issues which differentiated liberal, socialist, and radical feminists in this research were analyzed to determine their consistency with the theoretical frameworks upon which these varying perspectives build. It was hypothesized, based upon these frameworks, that liberal feminists would identify problems related to political-legal dimensions as more severe than other feminists; that socialist feminists would view economically oriented problems with greater severity; and that radical feminists would consider problems related to sexual-reproductive dimensions as more severe.

Of the 19 problems viewed as more severe by socialist feminists than by liberal or radical feminists, 10 were directly oriented to economic concerns, either in the workplace or in the home, including: "inadequate income or support," "lack of equal job opportunities," "nonpayment of child support," "poor job market," "unemployment," "pay inequities for work of comparable value," "insurance inequities," "low wages," "lack of access to non-traditional jobs," and "underemployment." Three problems could be viewed in terms of consequences of economic inequities: "inadequate housing," "hunger and malnutrition," "inadequate legal representation." One problem related to the oppression of ethnic minorities, i.e. "ethnic minority discrimination," and 3 referred to sexist attitudes and practices inherent in the patriarchal system: "prejudice against women in general," "violence against women in the media," and "domineering attitudes of men." These 17 issues differentiating socialist feminism from either liberal or radical feminism are consistent with the theoretical framework upon which this type of feminism builds. Only 2 of the issues which socialist feminists viewed as more severe than liberal feminists appear to be less than consistent with the former and would have seemed more consistent with the perspective from which liberal feminism stems. These 2 issues, "lack of

equal educational opportunities" and "lack of passage of the Equal Rights Amendment," appear to relate to political-legal problems thwarting individual civil rights and equal opportunities, i.e. liberal feminist dimensions.

The 2 problems viewed as more severe by radical than socialist feminists, i.e. "sexual harassment" and "displaced homemakers," are consistent with the radical perspective which locates the origins of women's oppression in the patriarchal control of female sexuality and fertility. Radical feminists also viewed these problems as more severe than liberal feminists. Three of the remaining problems on which radical and liberal feminists differ, "interpersonal conflicts with men in the work environment," "pay inequities for work of comparable value," and "inability to obtain credit" are not clearly identifiable with the radical perspective. The final problem on which these two feminist types differ, "prejudice against women in general," can be argued to be consistent with the radical perspective in that radical feminism identifies male power and privilege in patriarchal relations in the private sphere as the essential determinant of women's subordination. This problem is, however, also consistent with the socialist perspective and distinguished socialist from liberal feminists as indicated above.

Liberal feminists viewed the problem of "inadequate spiritual and religious training" as more severe than socialist feminists. This problem does not appear to be related to the liberal feminist perspective focusing on equal opportunities and access and political-legal dimensions.

In summary, problems distinguishing socialist feminists from radical and liberal feminists appear to be most consistent with the hypothesis that socialist feminists would view economically oriented problems as more severe than other feminists, although there is not complete consistency. There is no evidence to support the hypothesis that liberal feminists identify problems related to political-legal dimensions as more severe. The hypothesis that radical feminists view problems related to sexual-reproductive functions as more severe is supported in terms of the distinction between radical and socialist feminists but is supported only in part in terms of differences between radical and liberal feminists.

These findings concerning type of feminist identification indicate that liberal, socialist, and radical feminist social work educators

demonstrate greater similarities than differences in their views of women's issues. A theme in feminist theory is the recognition that in spite of definitional diversity, which is valued, feminists are more alike than different in their views. Their unifying bond is the agreement that women's oppression and subordination in this society must be eliminated. The current research provides empirical evidence for this analysis of theory.

Implications for Social Work Education

This research indicates that a "women's issues" component in the social work curriculum cannot be assumed equivalent to feminist theory since differences in feminist and non-feminist views of these issues are apparent. A prevalent approach within social work education to meeting Standard 1234B-Women is the inclusion of "content on women," or "women's issues" courses. This approach in itself provides no particular theoretical framework through which women in society can be studied and too frequently takes the form of the "add-women-and-stir" philosophy (Bunch & Pollack, 1983). An alternative approach is to handle women's content in the curriculum within the context of "special issues" or "special groups." This alternative hardly seems justified when over two-thirds of social work clients and practitioners are female. Our treatment as a "special group" represents very little progression from the traditional "woman as other" or "second sex" orientation.

Social work educators should advocate for the validity and utility of feminist analyses and for its infusion into social work education, rather than the currently predominant and neutral "women's issues" approach. Others within social work education have written of the inadequacies of this limited "women's issues" approach as well as of the value of feminist perspectives to education and practice (see, for example, Wetzel and the Feminist World View Educators, 1983; Bricker-Jenkins & Hooyman, 1984; and Van Den Bergh and Cooper, 1984). The present research provides empirical data to support their theoretical analyses. Feminism goes beyond a women's issues approach through the application of a particular theoretical framework which is designed to eliminate the oppression of women in society in order to achieve women's liberation.

Feminism, as a female-centered mode of analysis, is suggested as a particularly appropriate theoretical framework for teaching social work practice, especially since social work is and has always been a

predominantly female profession serving a predominantly female clientele. Feminist theory offers a relevant framework for the assessment of social functioning and the design and implementation of interventions to improve, enhance, or restore the functioning of individuals, families, groups, organizations, communities, and society. These tasks are the core of social work practice. The combined emphasis of feminism on thought and action is fundamental to social change and in this way is quite consistent with a basic social work goal of social action to improve societal conditions.

Further Research

The present research raises several issues for further speculation regarding social work education. The question addressed in this research concerned the influences of feminist identification on views of women's issues. Since the findings indicate that this identification does influence these views, then the next logical research question concerns the influences of such feminist thought on the social work curriculum. Since feminist educators view certain problems affecting women as more severe than non-feminist educators, is it possible that they are more likely to include content on these issues in their courses? Do feminist educators more readily foster students' awareness of and interest in problems affecting women and encourage social action as solutions?

Furthermore, feminist approaches to education involve much more than curriculum content issues (see, for example, Bunch & Pollack, 1983). Rather, a model of feminist education includes attention to process and structure as well. Feminist social work educators must continue their dialogue regarding the interaction of feminism and social work and through this process further a better understanding of the application of feminist theory within social work education and practice (see, for example, Bricker-Jenkins & Hooyman, 1984; Van Den Bergh & Cooper, 1984).

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